

Using Visual Images to Enhance Comprehension

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Abstract

Imagery is ignored in the classroom. With so much emphasis being placed on standardized test teachers tend to construct their curriculum accordingly. Comprehension is not simply the memorization of key points in a book, as one will find in reading this essay, but instead consists of a variety of complex components that serve as a tool to enhance textual understanding. This paper will focus on one comprehension tool in particular, and that tool is the use of imagery to enhance the understanding of a text. Three articles were analyzed and used to support the purpose, strategies, and teacher preparation of imagery in the classroom.

Introduction

As future teachers, we have seen students who are simply instructed to read a story and then draw a picture about what they read. This serves as a great visual representation of a story if the student does in fact draw a picture that correlates with the story. However, the problem with just drawing a picture is that students do just that--draw a picture. A picture serves no purpose if it has no correlation with the text. Therefore, using pictures and visual images of the text can enhance comprehension if the strategies are used correctly.

Purpose

Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2008) explain that “low-ability readers with comprehension difficulties are not able to describe the pictures in their minds as they read” (p. 759). For instance, when McTigue (2010) inserts a monkey into the story she shares with her class, she asks students, “What color is the monkey?” in which a subset of students protested, “I don’t see a monkey!” (p. 53). Studies have shown that there is a direct link between poor comprehension skills and the ability to visualize text. Therefore, not only does imagery need to be implemented across the curriculum, but should be done so by using a variety of strategies to enhance comprehension.

Strategies

Mental imaging

We can not expect students to draw a picture from what they read if they can not first visualize, or produce mental images in their head. So, when students are asked to “picture” what they read, and they have never learned how to “imagine” before, don’t be surprised to get a handful of puzzled faces. We can’t expect students to master a skill

they have never been taught. Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson devised a strategy that allows students to first and most importantly, create a picture in their mind. In order to get students to create visual images, Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) use an analogy of a television. That is, we “watch” as we read and that means that the pictures need to match the words. By explaining to students that when they start picturing images outside of the story this means they have “changed the channel” and need to get back on the right channel in order to create an appropriate mind picture (p. 760).

Familiarize Vocabulary

When starting a topic on visualization it would benefit the students if the teacher first got them familiar with the term *imagination*. Starting with a familiar word allows for the introduction of *images* and *imagery* (McTigue, 2003, p. 760). Not only is vocabulary important for introducing the topic of imagery, it is also beneficial in guiding students through the story (Naughton, 2008, p. 67). According to Naughton (2008), “The reader needs to follow the progression of the story along a path strewn with unfamiliar words” (p. 67) When a student does tackle a text that consists of an abundance of new vocabulary words, an understanding of the vocabulary is critical to the comprehension of the story. Take any of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories as an example. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” words like connoisseur, crypt, niche, and catacombs are essential when comprehending the plot. In addition to just understanding the vocabulary of a text, “unless students are able to attach a new word’s meaning to some schema, it is often soon forgotten” (Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson, 2008, p. 764). For example, it’s hard to picture a hare in the book The Tortoise and the Hare if one lacks the prior knowledge that a hare resembles a rabbit.

Modeling

Modeling is an appropriate strategy to use when teaching imagery. “A quick sketch made by the teacher is a useful tool to create understanding” (Hibbing and Rankin-Erikson, 2003, p. 762). While keeping in mind the variety of individual learning styles and intelligences in the classroom, some students will “thoroughly enjoy the process of drawing a picture of what they see in their mind’s eye, while others may be more reluctant to display their efforts” (Naughton, 2008, p. 66). In this case, the teacher can model the process of drawing the key points of the story. Modeling how to visualize and correlate images with the text allows students who aren’t as artistically talented to feel more comfortable with their artwork. When the student sees that the teacher’s artistic abilities aren’t superb either, they can begin to realize that the goal of the assignment is not to draw a good picture but to show they understand what they read. However, while modeling is an important strategy, McTigue (2010) cautions teachers to make sure the students don’t defer to the teacher’s ideas (p. 53). Modeling is only effective when students are given multiple opportunities to come up with their own mental images to represent the text. In the case of imagery, modeling is used as a scaffold.

Study Picture to Text Relationships

In order to help students get an idea of how to develop or draw their own pictures that correlate with the text, a useful strategy would be to have students study the picture to text relationships in books. Students might be instructed to read each page at a time and then discuss which part of the reading was highlighted by the pictures (McTigue, 2010, p. 55). The key aspect to remember when teaching students about picture to text relationships is that everyone has their own interpretation, or way to actually draw the

picture. It is important to stress that the way the picture looks is insignificant as long as the picture correlates with the main idea of the story. So, a technique McTigue (2010) uses is to select a book with multiple published versions so that students can examine illustrations by different artist (p. 55) to see that the pictures are not the same.

Drawing Pictures

Pictures can bring words to life. The saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” couldn’t be more appropriate when discussing visualization as a tool for comprehension. The Picture It! reading strategy is an excellent way to help the reader thoroughly understand the text (Naughton, 2008, p. 65). The PictureIt approach begins with a pictorial of the five elements of a story that can be taught to the acronym:

S—setting

T—talking characters

O—oops, a problem!

R—attempts to resolve the problem

Y—yes, the problem is solved

After a student reads a story, they then draw five separate pictures representing each letter, or element of a story. Then, the students take those five drawings and make one big picture which represents all elements of the story and thus, the main idea, or big picture (Naughton, 2008, p. 67). By creating five small pictures, students visually see that in order to comprehend a story they have to grasp an understanding of the story elements.

Teacher Preparation

Teachers should go in teaching imagery with the expectation that only some students will be able visualize images in their head. It is also important to note that the

students who can't make the connection are more apt to be struggling readers. Struggling readers can not match words with pictures, not only because of lack of focused attention or the struggle to decode words but also because of a limited vocabulary and background knowledge (Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson, 2003, p. 761). As a teacher, we need to realize that many factors play a role in the inability to create a picture to match the text. So, by being knowledgeable of these detrimental factors, the teacher needs to provide a variety of opportunities that will not only teach students what imagery is, but will also provide them with differentiated strategies that will benefit the individual needs of the students.

Conclusion

The teaching technique of imagery seems to have seeped through the cracks of today's classroom curriculum. That is, "this well-established aspect of reading comprehension is neglected" (McTigue, 2010, p. 53). When we want to assess students on their comprehension, we simply throw a test in front of them and see how many questions they can answer from the reading. This is a problem. As teachers, we need to provide a variety of opportunities to teach and assess students on comprehension to meet the diversity of the classroom. Most students never learn how to use visual images to enhance their understanding of the text because teachers lack the knowledge on how to teach the concept of imagery. By extending our understanding of imagery as tool for comprehension, we can achieve the ultimate goal, which is to make our students better readers.

References

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